DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 603 CS 213 681

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TITLE Writing Matters. Occasional Paper No. 31.
INSTITUTION National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, Berkeley, CA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jun 92
CONTRACT R117G10036
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Students; Elementary Secondary Education; Limited English Speaking; Portfolios (Background Materials); Research Utilization; *Writing Evaluation; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS African Americans; Research Synthesis

ABSTRACT

Recent research creates a better understanding of how writing is best learned, taught, and used for learning in school and life. Research done by Anne Haas Dyson and Carol Stack has indicated that many low-income African American children may bring resources to school that are often overlooked. Matthew Downey moves from Dyson's findings about how children first learn to write to examine how writing can help spark the interest of third graders in history. Robert Calfee is studying the growing use of portfolios of elementary school student work to evaluate writing. John R. Hayes and Karen A. Schriver are studying innovative ways to evaluate the effectiveness of writing both in the classroom and in "real world" situations. Sandra Schecter's research explains the effects on teaching that derive from writing teachers' own research concerning classroom learning. The research by Guadalupe Valdes and Sau-ling Wong has shown that most new immigrant students who speak little English are already proficient writers in their first language. Much of the Center's research dealing with improved educational practice, from kindergarten to adulthood, points to new strategies aimed at reducing educational failure and providing the nation with a more literate generation, able to cope with new demands on the work force. (A list of 11 research projects and project directors is attached.) (RS)

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ED353603

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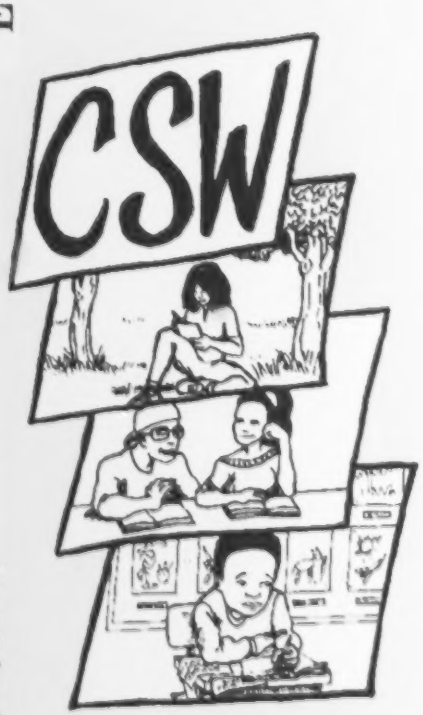
June, 1992



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The publication of this report was supported under the Educational Research and Development Center Program (grant number R117G10036 for the National Center for the Study of Writing) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the position or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement or the U.S. Department of Education.

This publication was produced on an Apple Macintosh IIsi computer with portrait display monitor and an Apple LaserWriter IIntx printer donated to the National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy by Apple Computer, Inc.

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Writing Matters

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A modern culture that has been taught to believe that "the medium is the message" is in danger of forgetting that the message, however transmitted, depends on the people's ability to write and read it. When there is reason to question the state of that ability, the initial impact on a new generation's learning constitutes a threat to young people's, and the society's, future.

The American public is ready for major improvements in the quality of public education. The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy concentrates on research aimed at achieving these improvements and translating them into practice for all age groups. The Center's research creates a better understanding of how writing is best learned, taught, and used for learning in school and life.

The Center's current research builds on findings from its first five years (1985-1990), which showed that the teaching and learning of writing needs to be improved and reshaped. Most importantly, Center research has already shown that our schools need a greater diversity of teaching approaches that recognize the skills students already bring with them, that recognize the variety of writing practices students need to learn, that seek to give students the opportunity to find their own "voices" in writing, and that connect with students' lives.

In this report, we begin by discussing new findings related to the early years of schooling, moving from there to a focus on the later years, considering important issues such as the controversies surrounding the assessment of writing, the professionalization of teaching, and the challenges of educating students who do not speak English as their first language.

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In the early primary grades, it does not matter so much what or how children write but rather that they begin to write and to reflect upon what they feel is important for them, giving themselves and their teachers a starting place. Anne Haas Dyson's research offers educators new ways of thinking about literacy teaching and learning. She uncovers language resources in the children that are often ignored. For example, the African American children whom she observed used language in metaphoric and poetic ways that are not expected by many teachers. These sophisticated language skills provided a strong foundation for their writing in school. These observations apply to the early writing potential of all children.

But there is no standard rule for the early teaching of writing. Children learn in different ways. Some need to draw, write, and talk playfully with other children to develop their ideas and write about them. Others need to perform and entertain an audience. Even beginning writers like to have a more extensive audience than just their teacher, but they need audiences that are appreciative, not just critical, of their work. Parents and teachers should be aware of how they themselves use language—in stories they share, jokes they tell, songs they enjoy—and how they listen to and appreciate young children's language, oral or written.

Carol Stack, like Dyson, indicates that many low-income African American children may bring resources to school that are now often being overlooked. Her study, which is just beginning, focuses on family resources that may provide valuable help in teaching children to write. This research will show teachers how to promote better understanding of the diversity of homes from which children come and how to forge closer relationships with parents.

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Almost as soon as young children have learned to write, they can begin to use that new skill to learn. Matthew Downey moves from Dyson's findings about how children first learn to write to examine how writing can help to spark the interest of third graders in how people lived in an earlier age. This is the beginning of the study of history. Following the new *California History-*

Social Science Framework, Downey sets the stage for history learning. In a corner of the classroom, he places simple "history centers," in which children make discoveries about earlier times. These "history centers" are stocked with artifacts, clothes, books, photographs, and original documents from some period in the past. The children play with the artifacts and clothes, read the materials, and write journals, essays on topics of interest to them, and their own historical fiction. They develop a sense of what history means—the ability to step into the shoes of someone who lived in another time, see the world from that person's point of view, and make connections with the past. The development of such historical understanding also requires a knowledge of facts, but this should be attained without rote memorization.

By the time children begin the third grade, they have already absorbed a good deal of historical information. Much of it is "holiday history" acquired during the primary grades through the celebration of Columbus Day, Thanksgiving, the Presidents' Day, and Martin Luther King's birthday. Along with vivid images, the students pick up much misinformation, disconnected fragments, historical half-truths, and stereotypes. Third grade is not too early to give students an opportunity to learn about history and examine critically the knowledge they have brought with them.

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In the face of growing dissatisfaction with the methods and instruments currently used to judge what students know, the Center is looking at new ways of evaluating writing. Robert Calfee is studying the growing use of portfolios of student work in elementary and middle schools. Portfolios include samples of student writing. They relieve the unnatural time pressures placed on children by standardized writing tests. However, at present much uncertainty remains about the use of portfolios. Critics fear that portfolios may lead to chaotic standards and create an attitude that "anything goes" in assessment.

Calfee's project raises the following questions: What do educators really mean when they say that they are "doing portfolios"? What should be included in the folder? What process should be used to evaluate the student's work? What standards should be used to decide on the adequacy of student work? What can the assessments be used for? Some educators have proposed

that portfolios replace standardized tests altogether, but what if every classroom approaches the task with different processes and standards?

Calfee finds that the portfolio movement has the elements of a positive revolution: teachers regaining control of assessment policy; tasks that require students to demonstrate what they have learned; "bottom up" rather than "top down" decisions. The use of portfolios found teachers spending much time and energy rethinking the meaning of their work and feeling good about their new commitment. A common theme is "ownership." Teachers report that they sense that this movement puts them in charge of the way they teach, and that students benefit from a greater responsibility to select and critique their writing in portfolios.

Because portfolios are an in-house way to test writing, their use tends to collide with support for traditional external testing.

The use of portfolios underscores the importance of writing in the curriculum. Teachers cannot build portfolios unless students write frequently in the classroom. If properly kept, portfolios also give parents better insights into their children's progress that is more informative than a simple grade on a report card.

Calfee suggests three possible outcomes of the portfolio movement:

1. It will go away for lack of support. Assessment via portfolios, if taken seriously, entails much work for teachers (and students). "Who's interested?" will eventually determine its fate.

2. It will become standardized. There are already commercially distributed preprinted folders.

3. It will incite a genuine revolution—but only if accompanied by other systemic changes in the educational process. That prospect is compelling, but it remains to be seen whether changes in assessment will be the policy lever for school reform.

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Good writing is essential not only in elementary and secondary schools but in higher education and in the "real world." Anyone who has tried to

make sense of an instructional manual for a VCR or computer knows that the effective use of technology depends in large measure on writers who can explain complex procedures clearly to varied consumers. Effective writing skills are needed to get and hold a job, to apply for and be admitted to college, to navigate through an infinite variety of forms and reports. In an upcoming project, Glynda Hull will study the new demands for writing in the work place of tomorrow.

John R. Hayes and Karen A. Schriver are studying innovative ways to evaluate the effectiveness of writing both in the classroom and in "real world" situations. They find that when writers have an opportunity to see how their intended readers actually respond, they learn to anticipate how to serve their readers better as they write.

Linda Flower focuses on the fact that arguments take different forms for different audiences and for different purposes. Sometimes, especially in university classes, students read and synthesize material. They learn to understand the differences between writing to present a fair, balanced view of controversial issues in the academic world as compared with trying to win a case, as in political campaign literature or television commercials.

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At a time when there is much emphasis on the need to professionalize teaching as well as on school-based management, teachers have begun to engage in research. This does not imply that all teachers must do research to be considered professionals, but that teacher research must be made financially possible. The relationship of such research to effective teaching and teachers' unique position to contribute classroom-oriented knowledge should be given the consideration it has lacked in the past.

Sandra R. Schecter's research project explains the effects on teaching that derive from writing teachers' own research concerning classroom learning. Schecter finds that one serious limitation is that teachers have difficulty finding sufficient time to write about their research. However, her findings strongly suggest that support to enable teachers to come together in groups to conduct their own classroom-based inquiry allows teachers to overcome feelings of isolation and fragmentation and encourages them to be committed to and engaged in their mission as professional educators.

The upcoming Center project directed by Sarah W. Freedman and Elizabeth Simons will coordinate teacher researchers from around the nation to provide insights into literacy learning in urban multicultural classrooms.

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Several million students who speak little English are currently enrolled in American public schools and the numbers are increasing. Thousands arrive in the U.S. annually without any English language skills; most of these students speak Spanish or an Asian language. The research by Guadalupe Valdés and Sau-ling Wong has shown that most of these new immigrants are already proficient writers in their first language. There is an imminent danger that these children will be considered lacking in academic potential and thereby set up for failure. Valdés and Wong's research stresses that many present methods of trying to help students become proficient in English literacy are seriously flawed. They observed strategies in teaching reading and writing in English that required teenagers to fill in blanks, cut out pictures, or color in drawings. This in no way improves their reading and writing skills in English and tends to impugn their intelligence and self-esteem. These practices are based on a lack of understanding of these children's abilities and their previous education in their first language. As a result, then, students either tune out or rebel and become disruptive. A curriculum that focuses only on teaching spoken English limits these students' capacities to cope with the American curriculum. These adolescents must learn to read, write, and listen as soon as they enter American schools if they are to succeed in their studies.

Parents could help to improve the education of their children by giving school personnel information about their children's reading and writing skills in their first language. However, the schools cannot afford to wait for parents, who are usually nonnative speakers themselves, to provide this information.

There is a need for further study to determine to what extent these findings are broadly applicable. Answers will be provided in a forthcoming research project to be conducted by John Ogbu, Elizabeth Simons, and Herbert Simons. In addition, the national study by Freedman and Simons will be

coupled with the Valdés and Wong study to suggest new approaches to benefit these students.

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While the improvement of education must begin in the classroom and depends mainly on local and state support, the task involves policymakers at all levels. Their judgment and leadership is needed to implement new approaches suggested by the Center. Hopes for improved teaching and learning are largely based on reforms initiated in the classroom rather than those mandated from above. This, however, does not relieve the authorities at the top of responsibilities for the support of changes intended to transform action in the classroom. On the contrary, action in the classroom depends, to a large degree, on support at the district, state, and federal levels. The Center hopes that research conducted under its auspices can be translated as rapidly as possible into teaching and learning practice. This cannot be accomplished without at least a green light, and whenever possible, active support from those who determine educational policies.

At a time when existing assessment instruments and policies are under scrutiny, it is crucial that those who will eventually make the decisions about the use of new evaluation procedures and instruments help to remove obstacles to reform. At the start, policymakers should carefully consider the outcomes and recommendations of the Center's research cited in this report. For example, the emerging use of portfolios to measure students' achievement and progress needs to be reviewed and, if found effective, supported at all levels of educational decision-making. This clearly includes those who determine policies for teacher education and development. Where the changes require wider understanding by the American public, and particularly parents of school-aged children, policymakers should join in explaining the reasons for changed practices.

Because of current efforts to give classroom teachers greater responsibilities and powers in the reform of teaching and learning, research by classroom teachers themselves deserves the kind of support that has generally been reserved for academic research. Recognition of teacher-researchers' accomplishments at the higher levels of educational

policymaking will greatly enhance the professional standing of classroom teachers and their status within the community.

The plight of a large and growing number of youngsters at all age and grade levels who enter school without any knowledge of English constitutes a clear and present emergency. The Center's research documents beyond any doubt the inadequate, and often severely damaging, approach to these youngsters' educational needs. Remedies include and indeed highlight the importance of effective instruction in the writing and reading of English, with attention to the level of literacy in these children's native languages. Most Chinese and Mexican-origin students who enter the American schools at the middle or high school level come with extensive prior schooling and well-developed writing skills in their native languages. Teachers should understand their educational background and provide them as rapidly as possible with English writing and language skills to enable them to continue their progress on the basis of prior achievements and newly-acquired skills.

All of this requires a greater knowledge on the part of their teachers of the educational systems and cultural as well as home background of these students. This means that the improvement of present practices is of national importance and calls for support from policymakers at all levels. Currently, students lack opportunities to prepare for existing tests, such as high school competency tests. These tests unfairly penalize these students and stand in the way of their educational progress, including graduation from high school. Such policies should be reexamined and, if necessary, changed or eliminated.

Much of the Center's research dealing with improved educational practice, from kindergarten to adulthood, points to new strategies aimed at reducing educational failure and providing the nation with a more literate generation, able to cope with new demands on the work force. Skills in written expression are an absolute prerequisite, which deserve the support of community, business, and political leaders. The ability to communicate in spoken and written language is no academic luxury; it is a key to economic and social success in a competitive society.

CENTER RESEARCH PROJECTS AND PROJECT DIRECTORS

Diversity and Literacy Development in the Early Years — Anne Haas Dyson, *University of California at Berkeley*

Writing to Learn History in the Intermediate Grades — Matthew T. Downey, *University of California at Berkeley*

The Oral and Written Language Growth of Non-English-Background Secondary Students — Guadalupe Valdés and Sau-ling Wong, *University of California at Berkeley*

Writing in the Multicultural Secondary Classroom — Sarah Warshauer Freedman and Elizabeth Simons, *University of California at Berkeley*

Teacher Research in Action — Sandra R. Schecter, *University of California at Berkeley*

Evaluating Writing Through Portfolios — Robert Calfee, *Stanford University*

Experimental Approaches to Evaluating Writing — John R. Hayes and Karen A. Schriver, *Carnegie Mellon University*

The Writing of Arguments Across Diverse Contexts — Linda Flower, *Carnegie Mellon University*

Families, Literacy, and Schooling — Carol B. Stack, *University of California at Berkeley*

Student Engagement in Multicultural Writing and Literature Classrooms — John Ogbu, Elizabeth Simons, and Herbert Simons, *University of California at Berkeley*

New Technologies in Writing Classrooms and Literacy in the Workplace — Glynda Hull, *University of California at Berkeley*

NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING AND LITERACY

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The National Center for the Study of Writing and Literacy, one of the national educational research centers sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement, is located at the Graduate School of Education at the University of California at Berkeley, with a site at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The Center provides leadership to elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities as they work to improve the teaching and learning of writing. The Center supports an extensive program of educational research and development in which some of the country's top language and literacy experts work to discover how the teaching and learning of writing can be improved, from the early years of schooling through adulthood. The Center's four major objectives are: (1) to create useful theories for the teaching and learning of writing; (2) to understand more fully the connections between writing and learning; (3) to provide a national focal point for writing research; and (4) to disseminate its results to American educators, policy-makers, and the public. Through its ongoing relationship with the National Writing Project, a network of expert teachers coordinated through Berkeley's Graduate School of Education, the Center involves classroom teachers in helping to shape the Center's research agenda and in making use of findings from the research. Underlying the Center's research effort is the belief that research both must move into the classroom and come from it; thus, the Center supports "practice-sensitive research" for "research-sensitive practice."

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